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ABSTRACT

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Communication and Social Change:
Appropriate Adaptations for Adult Learner Diversity

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Abstract

Lifelong education is a critical issue for higher education. The number of adult learners in university classrooms is and will continue to increase. In this paper we address: (1) the impact of the changes in the cultural diversity of university students; (2) motivations of adult learners for continuing their education, with its implications for learning style differences; and (3) recommendations for adapting university education and communication education in particular to empower adult learners.

Communication and Social Change:

Appropriate Adaptations for Adult Learner Diversity

> Our educational system is absolutely inadequate -- not relatively [but] absolutely inadequate -- for the purposes of democracy. (Mortimer Adler, Kidder, 1988, p. 16)
>
> By the year 2000, American colleges and universities will be lean and mean, service oriented and science minded, multicultural and increasingly diverse -- if they intend to survive their fiscal agony. (Elson, 1992, p. 54)
>
> . . . mature, adult-aged or nontraditional student is seen as higher education's "expanding market". The challenge of identifying, preparing for and meeting the needs of this "emerging majority" will fall heavily to evening, weekend, and off-campus programs. Meeting the challenge will require a more thorough understanding of these learners. (Stone, Zelazek & Willey, 1992, p. 2)

Overview

The decade of the 90's will be remembered as time of crisis in American higher education. After years of growth and positive positioning, academia now faces several challenges. There has been a prolonged fiscal crisis exacerbated by an economic recession, a crisis in public confidence questioning the value and the quality of higher education, limited data to demonstrate that graduates possess required skills and knowledge for success, and a demographic shift, caused by the aging of the baby boom population, changing what constitutes the typical university student.

Lifelong education is a critical issue for higher education. The numbers and proportions of older, part-time, and nontraditional students entering or reentering higher education has increased significantly during the 80's and early 90's. This increase is expected to accelerate through the year 2000. The adult-aged learner will comprise the "expanding market" for

higher education in the coming decades. The 1993 Lifelong Learning conference sponsored by National University University Research Institute flyer contains these words, "Presently, of the 12.5 million students served by America's 3,300 institutions of higher education, only 2 million meet the 'typical' college student" (p. 1). Schmidt (1992) notes, "With more than half of their students now at least 25 years old or older, universities are trying to decide how to address the different needs of students" (p. 1).

The next decades will feature an increasingly older adult learner population. Shannon (1986) says, "Most of us are aware that the fastest growing segment of the nation's population in the current decade is the 35 to 44 year old group, and that by 1987 it is estimated that 20 percent of the population will be over 65" (p. 8). Elson (1992) noted:

> Even today, only 20% of the nation's undergraduates are young people between 18 and 22 who are pursuing a parent-financed education. Two fifths of all students today are part-timers, and more than a third are over 25. (p. 55)

University officials need to be intentional in planning to accommodate this culturally diverse population.

The purpose of this paper is to address: (1) the impact of changes in the cultural diversity of university students; (2) motivations of adult learners for continuing their education, with its implications for learning style differences; and (3) recommendations for adapting university education and communication education in particular to empower more fully adult learn-

ers.

Background

Although the adult learner may display more confidence that the traditional student, he or she often actually may be less confident of their abilities to succeed within an academic setting. Apps (1981) put it this way, "So the entire process of returning to the campus can be, and usually is, a bewildering experience for the returning students" (p. 45). Organizing time and study are among the problems that concern the returning adult learner.

Many myths distract adult learners from returning to colleges for advanced training. It should be made clear that as we grow older our intellectual powers do not decrease. Traditional students generally have learned to value doing things quickly. Adult learners use their time purposively. As a result of work experiences in the work world adults may feel that the ability to recall factual information quickly for tests is not as important as accuracy and the ultimate quality of the product produced. Adult learners respect many alternative responses more than a simple, singular answer recalled from a lecture. (Apps, 1981, p. 39-40)

Returning students have considerable experience on which to draw. They may have been (or continue to be) a homemaker, a parent, a volunteer, a professional person, etc. While these roles may be distracting, many adult learners need not be concerned about the adjustments of growing up, gaining their first real employment, and assuming the role as an adult. In

other words, distractions are present in both traditional and returning student populations although the causes for being distracted may differ greatly.

Returning students can bring a wealth of information to the classroom. They generally are more dedicated learners and often they pose more questions to the instructor and of the subject than traditional students. Traditional students may be more oriented toward taking tests. However, returning students have their advantages as well. For example, Apps (1981) quoted a professor as saying:

> Working with the undergraduate who has little experiences is like dropping a pebble down a very deep well and waiting for it to hit, but it never hits. With an older student it hits mighty fast. Older students get the point quickly. (p. 42)

Further, the edge in motivation often goes to the returning student. Motivation compelled adult learners to return to college and they usually are more willing to give additional attention to reasonable assignments. Returning students may be less influenced by informal learning styles, while traditional students generally require more teacher time. It may be easier to sway the values and beliefs of traditional students than those of returning students with more fixed-value positions. Additionally, non-traditional students are less likely to expect trite answers to complex questions.

The non-traditional students may create greater competition between themselves and their instructors than the typical traditional students. Professors are not ready always to be questioned in the way returning students are motivated to press. If

the instructor is confident enough to allow the returning student to share their views and experiences all students may learn from them. (Apps, 1981, p. 48) Alternative positions often do the most to stimulate thought and discussion.

As suggested, returning students often are afraid they will look dumb. As with all students, it is beneficial for the instructor to seek opportunities to enhance the self-esteem of the nontraditional student. These concerns may be stimulated by anxiety about appropriate child care and how the return to school will effect the primary relationship with the spouse.

Returning students are more likely to expect education to be practical. They generally want to see how things fit together. Pure theory often does not work as well with the adult learner. A variety of examples with practical application generally is beneficial for returning students to achieve closure regarding a principle.

There are differences in teaching traditional students (pedagogy) and teaching/training adult learners (androgogy). Androgogical practice may be defined as the art and science of helping adults learn. Galbraith (1990) summarizes Knowles and Associates components of androgogical practice as follows:

*establish a physical and psychological climate conducive to leaning;

*involve learners in mutual planning of methods and curricular directions;

*involve participants in diagnosing their own learning needs;

*encourage learners to formulate their own learning

objectives;

*encourage learners to identify resources and to devise strategies for using such resources to accomplish their objectives;

*help learners to carry out their learning plans;

*involve learners in evaluating their learning. (p. 5)

Additionally, Galbraith (1990) summarized S. D. Brookfield's principles of effective practice for adult learning:

1. Participation is voluntary; adults engage in learning as a result of their own volition.

2. Effective practice is characterized by a respect among participants for each other's self-worth.

3. Facilitation is collaborative.

4. Praxis is placed at the heart of effective facilitation; "learners and facilitators are involved in a continual process of activity, reflection upon activity, collaborative analysis of activity, new activity, further reflection, and collaborative analysis, and so on"

5. Facilitation aims to foster in adults a spirit of critical reflection.

6. The aim of facilitation is the nurturing of self-directed, empowered adults. (p. 6)

These lists from 1984 and 1986 respectively indicate frameworks and characteristics for guiding instructors in working with adult students. Obviously many of these goals are applicable and relevant to teaching any age or type of student. The empowerment of the adult learner does provide special opportunities to be sensitive to concerns such as those above.

Educators sensitive to the research regarding the adult learner may notice some largely unmet goals that relate to the adaption process of the adult learner. First, often adult learners do not see the connection between university studies (often general and relatively theoretical) and their major. Orientation to these connections and on-going opportunities for discussion of these connections would be helpful for non-traditional students in particular.

Second, each department needs to be sensitive to the need for an opportunity to orient students about the major. In particular, forecasting -- realistically -- the necessary theory, skills, experiences, etc. to do well in the major and answering questions from adult learners can be empowering to the returning student. This "brown-bag" seminar could include a discussion of student rights and responsibilities including items such as:

Understanding explicitly and clearly course goals

The priority on learning appropriate thinking (analysis) processes and methods of inquiry rather than primarily facts and theory

The importance of developing and appropriate critical perspective

To ask questions that will help connect with student's life and needs

To connect with scholarly inquiry -- what has been learned

To understand how specific courses relate to the outcomes of the major

To understand how general education connects with the major

Dialogue regarding what is needed to develop a supportive community for adult learners

Understanding of cultural diversity of faculty and student body

Understanding how the faculty advisement process functions in the department

Understanding the evaluation, assessment, and feedback processes of the department

Understanding how to access administrative support for student rights and responsibilities should be addressed in an orientation session and it should not be a one-shot orientation ("hypodermic needle" or "silver bullet") process. The process should be initiated prior to each semester and continued throughout the academic year.

Stark and Lowther (1988) said:

> A student's whole education must be greater than the sum of its parts and is a joint responsibility of all faculty. We must avoid artificial distinctions, either between education for life and education for work or between liberal study and professional study. Although differences in educational purpose exist, we must not assume that all forms of specialization are automatically "narrow vocationalism." (p. 9)

The call for balance is obvious. Equally the need for integration of androgogy and pedagogy and linking general education with the major(s) is important.

General Implications

Since many students use their academic major only indirectly in later employment, the importance of emphasis on the broader aspects of higher education is clear. The skills of evaluation and assessment, reflective-thinking processes, general/liberal education, successfully-applied practice (internships), and

communication competency development should be as or more important than attention to the specifics of the major itself.

Integration into the classroom of the activities and assignments provides a rich opportunity to empower adult learners. Assignments can be developed to bridge the education of "real life work" and the classroom to the benefit of both. Employers can be brought into collaboration with instructors much more closely than has been done previously at many institutions. This process can benefit the university and employers as well as the student and the classroom instructional process.

University education, historically, was envisioned by many to be a preparation for democracy. Registration and voter studies of traditional students indicate the universities have not been successful immediately in facilitating more political involvement. More adult learners appear to understand that social/political points of view are as or more important than facts, figures, and principles taken from the classroom and texts in isolation. Co-opting the adult learners' integration can lead to positive modeling for the traditional students.

Another way to link the experiences of non-traditional students with traditional students may be with the different views adult learners have regarding the value of media. Media has been viewed as the "Bible" (ethos) of the traditional student generation (the so-called "national text"). Traditional students are more fully and skillfully literate in TV than many in the faculty care to admit. Integration of TV as curriculum is possible and dialogue can be improved by greater utilization of adult

learners in the classroom. For example, many adult learners have modified their view of the power and potential of TV as they have had children and have considered some of the questions related to the social responsibility of media.

Comadena, Semlak, & Escott (1992) note: " . . . adult learners view teacher communicator style as a more important component of teacher effectiveness than do traditional undergraduate students. (p. 62) The ability of instructors to provide a variety communication styles in the classroom and to make appropriate adaptations is important.

Adult learners may help "bite the bullet" so to speak in recognition that there is nothing magic about a four-year undergraduate program cap. Adult learners tend to extend their program over several years and include diverse experiences in the process. Many academics appear addicted to the linear thought process of simply taking out a course here and there while adding additional requirements and minimizing student choice in the process. The result is more students are left with few or no elective courses as alternatives for judgment and selection.

Understanding adult learning styles helps academics recognize the artificial distinctions between university learning and outside (real life) learning. School learning inherently is relatively non-contextual and, all too often, is conducted in isolation. Outside learning is highly contextual (integrated with real-life concerns) and collaborative. Universities need to recognize the movement toward total quality management in business and the use of quality-circles type involvement of employees. There is an opportunity for adult learners to aid in empow-

ering faculty to adapt to this genre of more collaborative learning processes and improve the quality of higher education in the process.

Faculty need to recognize that learners, adult-learners in particular, have a right to expect inquiry-based courses. Inquiry-based courses address how we come to know what we know, what we now believe we know, how certain are we of what we believe we know, creative possibilities for application of knowledge, and directions for future research.

Ultimately, academia must recognize that cultural diversity of the student body is a plus and that steps should be undertaken to facilitate integration. The access processes at our universities, the accommodation process, and the integration of cultural diversity must be addressed.

We must end the image of some departments as sideshow barkers pitching their wares separate from other majors, and general/liberal education, and, ultimately, unrelated to life. Only those who are afraid to openly examine their major will resist this.

Mentoring for all students and the adult learner in particular is essential, as well as collaborative relationships with adult learners. The use of advisory boards with adult-learner representation should be implemented. Certainly comfortable physical space should be provided to facilitate collaborative, integrated learning.

Considering the diverse learning styles of non-traditional students in particular, more emphasis should be placed on affec-

tive domain learning. Cognitive and psychomotor domains are important of course, but not to the relative exclusion of the affective domain. Further, the learning process likely should include more active learning opportunities. To be a citizen of the global village of the twenty-first century, travel and study abroad and a third-world type experience (developing country or a soup kitchen/homeless shelter domestically) as a part of the educational requirement would be available..

A curriculum designed to assure graduates have communication competence -- intrapersonally, interpersonally, in group settings, in public settings, and an understanding of the potential of mass media as well as is essential.

Further the adult learner must have a curriculum that encourages an understanding of the world and global-environmental issues and be equipped with strategic planning process to augment thinking processes. The practical curriculum should allow adults to share what they have learned have positive reinforcement, and provide for a variety of learning styles. Ultimately this curriculum must be holistic and culturally diverse.

Implications for Communication Education

Departments of communication need to renew their present processes of recruitment, orientation, support, employment, and tracking of adult learners.

Adult learners may not recognize the many changes that have occurred in communication departments. In short, they may not be aware fully of the many career opportunities available to them. For examples, opportunities in organizational communication and

international communication studies could be highlighted.

Communication departments should be positioned ideally to facilitate the entry or reentry of adult learners. Information indicating that experience is valued and that student histories/narratives are important to study in the communication discipline can relieve some adult learner anxiety. The practical (applied) nature of communication studies should be emphasized. Adult learners generally are interested in the practical, work-related disciplines.

Recruitment and Admission Considerations

Departments should advertise child care alternatives along with the values of the program. Support for part-time and extended study should be legitimized in the recruitment literature.

Consideration must be given to the adequacy of the facilities available. Are there places where adult learners may gather together to study and share life experiences with faculty and each other? Having "coffee clutch" area available close to classrooms can be a plus for adult learners. Recognition of special expectations and needs of adults is not only helpful to the student, but is beneficial to the faculty.

Many communication departments may not be aware of adult learner needs and thus do not express interest in the admission application of adult learners. If the department has any special scholarship funds for the adult learner it would be appropriate to publicize these resources.

Orientation

Careful planning of the orientation to the communication department should be completed for undergraduate as well as graduate, adult learners. As indicated above, there are important parameters to be explored in orientation to a discipline. Further, the process should be on-going in nature. Intended outcomes of each major program should be explained. The same is true with study/research methodologies appropriate to a particular communication major. Opportunities for experienced adult learners to answer questions from new traditional and non-traditional students in the program can be helpful to all concerned (the adult learner, the traditional student, and the department).

Departments should have written policies to share with the students and should indicate what student support networks are in place. Advisement procedures in particular should be covered. Responsibilities of internship contacts and related concerns should be discussed early in the learner's program.

Communication departments feature flexibility in employment opportunities. How faculty and staff members will help students look at career opportunities and plan, realistically, for employment in a communication-related fields should be made clear in writing and in discussions with adult learners.

Finally, indications of how important alumni contact is for the adult learner and for the department should be emphasized. Adult learners may be given the opportunity to write for the department newsletter indicating their career goals. Contact with the department's professional advisory board should be

encouraged (assuming such is in place). Maintaining contacts with graduates is an important link for department members to track what is happening to their products and what types of opportunities exist for internships and employment.

Summary

Lifelong education is a critical issue for higher education. The numbers and proportions of older, part-time, and nontraditional students entering or reentering higher education has and will continue to increase during the decade of the nineties. In coming decades the adult learners will comprise the "expanding market" in higher education. The adult learner generally is more culturally diverse and often presents a diversity of learning styles.

Encouraging imaginative ability, organizational skill development, leadership development, decision-making and problem-solving activities, brainstorming, and related forms of active learning are essential.

Finally specific suggestions for faculty to help improve recruitment and adaptation of adult learners in the communication departments of universities were offered.

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